

International Conference Promotes State, City Collaboration to Advance Justice for Sweatshop Workers

Worker Rights Advocates from Four Continents Gather in Minneapolis

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BANGOR, Maine - April 12 - Over 150 worker rights advocates from the United States, Canada, Europe, China, Haiti, Central America, and Mexico gathered for the first international SweatFree Communities conference, April 7-9, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Participants included advocates for sweatshop-free public and religious procurement, unions, garment workers, sweatshop-free garment producers, and youth groups. The Resource Center of the Americas hosted the conference.

“The conference brought together a significant cross-section of anti-sweatshop leaders in the United States and allies from around the world, and helped create unity and cohesion in the movement,” said Bjorn Claeson, Executive Director of SweatFree Communities.

On the heels of historic new sweatshop-free purchasing laws in San Francisco, Madison, and Milwaukee, and an unprecedented agreement among nine Catholic school boards in Ontario to pool resources for monitoring and inspecting factory suppliers of school uniforms, conference participants discussed a new collaborative effort proposed by Maine’s Governor John Baldacci to use state government procurement as a catalyst for justice for sweatshop workers.

“The Governor’s Coalition for Sweatfree Procurement and Worker Rights, as proposed by Governor Baldacci, can create a hundred billion dollar market for products and services made in humane conditions,” said Liana Foxvog, National Organizer with SweatFree Communities. “Such a market could rival even Wal-Mart in sheer economic clout and change apparel and other industries dominated by sweatshops.”

The SweatFree Communities conference included workshops on organizing and coalition building, participatory budgeting, new forms of worker organizing in sweatshops in China and the United States, independent monitoring, and cutting-edge initiatives to promote sweatfree and fair trade products. A youth organizing conference track was designed by youth to learn how to organize for sweatfree schools. Kimi Lee of the Los Angeles Garment Worker Center and Yannick Etienne of Batay Ouvriye, a worker rights organization in Haiti, were among the featured speakers.

Sweatfree purchasing policies, including a milestone San Francisco city ordinance that just went into effect, require government vendors and their subcontractors to abide by fair labor standards when supplying goods such as law enforcement uniforms and other apparel. The states of California, Illinois, Maine, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania have passed anti-sweatshop legislation, as well as dozens of cities including Los Angeles, Madison, Milwaukee, and Olympia.

SweatFree Communities supports and coordinates campaigns for public and religious institutions to adopt sweatfree procurement policies that end public support for sweatshops and generate significant market demand for products made in humane conditions by workers who are paid living wages.